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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides an introduction for people working in organizations concerned with housing and homelessness about basic skills. It provides background on the link between poor basic skills and poor housing and information about ways in which people use basic skills in their daily lives. Two reasons for housing organizations to be involved with basic skills are set forth: a person's competence with basic skills has a direct bearing on the way he or she is able to use housing organizations and agencies and improving the basic skills of staff working in housing organizations will improve the effectiveness of the organization. The next section discusses what housing organizations can do and describes three approaches: contracting, buying in, and integrating. Britain's Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) Standards for basic skills are discussed. The following ways in which the ALBSU can help the housing organization are then described: advice and consultancy, development projects, staff training, and material. An appendix outlines steps to ensure that written communications are easy to understand. These elements of design are addressed: white space, leading, typeface, type size, upper and lower case, illustrations/overprinting, page layout/page breaks, and paper choice/color. These elements of readability are then discussed: sentence length and choice of words/repetition. The ALBSU Standards Maps at the end of the booklet illustrate the communication skill and numeracy standards and what each element means. (YLB)

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MAKING IT HAPPEN

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INVOLVED WITH HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

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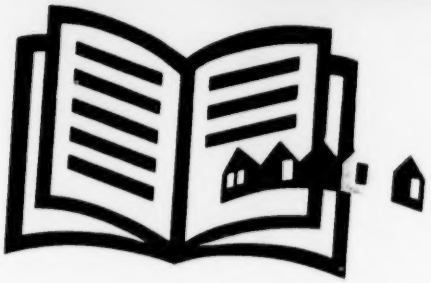
INTRODUCTION

THIS short booklet is intended to provide an introduction for people working in organisations concerned with housing and homelesssness about basic skills. We know you've got plenty to do just dealing with finding homes for people and dealing with housing issues; however, we think that a person's competence with basic skills, such as understanding and speaking English, reading, writing and basic maths, has a direct bearing on the way they are able to use housing organisations and agencies. We also believe that improving the basic skills of staff working in housing organisations will improve the effectiveness of the organisation.

This booklet should be of interest to people in

- **Local Authority Housing Departments**
- **Housing Action Trusts**
- **Housing Associations and Cooperatives**
- **Housing Advice Centres**
- **Organisations working with Homeless People.**



THERE'S a clear link between poor basic skills and poor housing. People who have difficulties with basic skills are more likely to suffer from a number of disadvantages. They are more likely to become unemployed, will, on average, be out of work longer, will have lower incomes, are less likely to own their own homes and are more likely to be dependent on benefits.

By basic skills we mean

> **'the ability to read, write, and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general'.**

Contrary to press reports we don't have a problem with illiteracy or innumeracy in the UK. Few people can't read, write or calculate at all and most people have some competence with basic skills. The main reason why people find basic skills difficult is because the level of demand for good basic skills has, and continues to, change rapidly. Fifty years ago the basic skills you needed were clear and simple. If you could read a little and sign your name you could get by. Work and everyday life demanded very little and the skills you had when you left school were likely to be good enough for the rest of your life.

People who have difficulty with speaking or understanding English, reading, spelling, writing and basic maths do not live in any single area in the UK. Nor is there a simple reason why they have problems with skills most people take for granted.

Some

- **missed long periods of schooling when they were young**
- **had physical problems such as poor speech or undiagnosed hearing or sight loss**
- **were just not very well taught**
- **do not have English as their mother tongue and were not educated in the UK**
- **have just found that their level of competence has been overtaken by the requirements of a modern, industrialised society.**

Less than 1 in 10 of people who have problems with basic skills have serious learning difficulties.

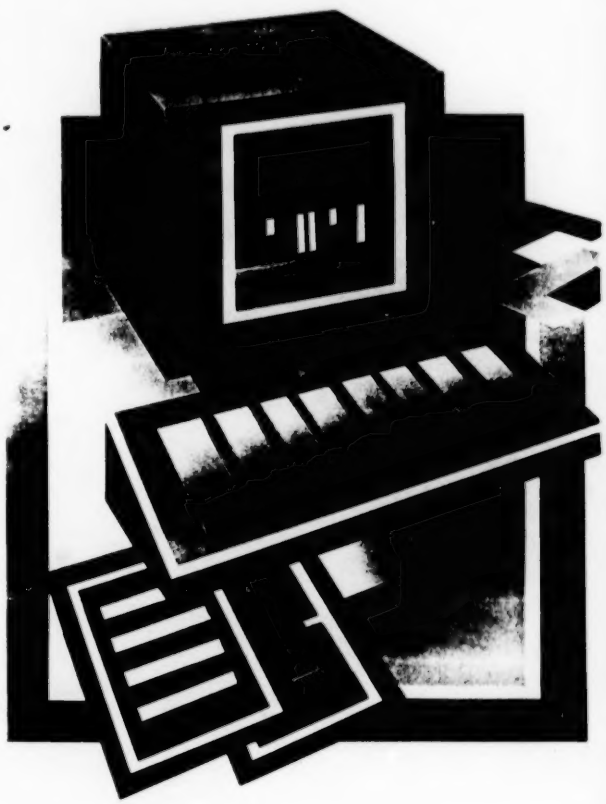
THE BASIC SKILLS YOU NEED

A recent survey produced valuable information about the ways in which we all use basic skills in our daily lives. We asked Gallup to find out which activities using basic skills a representative sample of people had undertaken in the previous seven days.

- More than four in five had paid by handing over the exact money in cash or checked change given in a shop.
- Three quarters had used a dictionary, encyclopaedia or telephone directory and the same number had filled out a form such as a paying-in slip, or withdrawal slip in a building society, bank or written out a cheque.
- Almost seven in ten had read a short advertisement and looked up or got information from a book or articles from newspapers, magazines or read signs such as safety signs, detailed warnings, food packaging and preparation.
- More than half had written out a shopping list or other type of list or read through a short recipe or similar set of instructions or read a short note or letter from a friend, family member or other person.

Yet authoritative research suggests that a significant number of people struggle with these basic skills – skills many of us take for granted. For instance:

- on average only 4 in 100 of the people assessed could not answer a question about a simple advert for a concert
- almost 1 in 10 found it difficult to understand information on a map
- almost 1 in 3 could not answer a question about hypothermia from an A4 sheet
- almost 2 in 3 could not answer a question about a complex, but short, literary passage
- 15% could not calculate the change from £20 if they had spent £17.89
- almost 1 in 3 could not add together £1.40, £3.86, £7.15 and 79 pence
- 2 out of 3 people could not work out the area of a shape, even when the formula was given
- 1 in 5 could not work out 10% of £4,900.



Taken as a whole this assessment of competence reveals that a minority of people have very serious problems with literacy and that a larger number need some support to improve their level of competence for the demands of the modern world. A substantial number of those assessed had serious difficulties with numeracy, including the four rules. However, problems with numeracy tend to be less of a positive disadvantage than problems with literacy.

Research does not suggest a significant difference between people of different age groups, except that elderly people (aged over 70) perform considerably worse on average than other people. This could be due to the effect of age, although there is no way of knowing whether this group performed better when they were younger, or because they were less used to being assessed than younger people.

If this research is a good indicator of the performance of adults as a whole in the UK (and even if the elderly are excluded) about 1 in 5 adults (approximately 7.5 million people) have very real difficulties with functional literacy and numeracy. While it is reassuring that few people are illiterate or innumerate in the sense that they cannot understand English, read or use basic maths at all, too many people can only operate at a very low level.

As we have said there is a clear link between poor basic skills and disadvantage. Research indicates that people reporting basic skills problems are, on average, living in more crowded conditions than others and a higher proportion of people with basic skills problems live in council housing or share with relatives. There is also a serious intergenerational effect of poor basic skills. Parents who have trouble with reading and writing are more likely to have children who have problems with reading and writing. Recent research indicates that:

- **more than 7 in 10 children from families where parents had reading problems and who were in the lowest income group, were in the lowest reading score group.**
- **over half the children in families where parents had reading problems and who had no school qualifications, were in the lowest reading score group.**
- **6 in 10 of children in the lowest reading attainment group at age 10 had parents with low literacy scores; only 2% had parents with high literacy scores.**

THERE are two main issues for housing organisations - client help and advice and staff performance. Housing organisations and agencies are aware increasingly of the need to improve communication with clients. They also want to increase the skills and expertise of staff, in order to make the best service available. Many of the tasks which involve understanding and speaking English, reading and writing and maths are at a high premium when dealing with any formal or official situation. Tasks such as:

- **listening to, understanding and following oral instructions**
- **reading signs and symbols**
- **reading leaflets and information**
- **making and keeping appointments**
- **filling in forms**
- **undertanding rights and responsibilities.**

Problems with basic skills may mean that people do not get to know about or make use of services available. Or they may just end up confused and uncertain. They may appear reluctant to take advice and unwilling to take in essential information.

About 166,400 people work in housing related organisations and agencies in Great Britain. Many have essential jobs which have often been considered as low skilled. But like much of British industry work is changing and unskilled and very low skilled jobs are disappearing rapidly. Increasingly people need good basic skills at work not just because of the immediate needs of a particular job, but because of the changing world of work. Only about 1 in 10 lower and middle level jobs does not require any communication skills and more than half of these jobs require some competence in basic maths. It's no wonder that people with poor basic skills are very much over represented in the unemployment statistics and that they make up a substantial proportion of the long-term unemployed in the UK. One startling statistic reveals much about this disadvantage. If you are unemployed and have poor basic skills, on average, you are likely to be without a job for five times as long as other unemployed people.

Current initiatives to increase tenant participation and establish local management of estates are likely to exclude residents with poor basic skills. Organisations working with homeless people have increasingly recognised the barriers that poor basic skills can create for clients, as they try to move from the streets into rented accommodation.

Good basic skills are needed to perform a wide range of activities safely and effectively at work including:

- **learning to do the job's main tasks**
- **doing the job's main tasks**
- **undertaking the more responsible aspects of the job**
- **being eligible for promotion to the next grade/ level**
- **understanding workplace procedures**
- **understand health and safety requirements**
- **communicating with colleagues**
- **communicating with customers.**

Basic skills have become more important in the workplace in the last five years because of:

- **technological change in production systems**
- **technological change in communication and information systems**
- **change in work organisation**
- **health and safety regulations**
- **production quality standards.**

A feature of the housing world has been the rapid rate of change. The introduction of the right to buy, the decline of the rented sector, the establishment of Housing Action Trusts and the formation of housing associations and cooperatives have all had a major impact. The significant increase in homelessness and the difficulty many people face in trying to make sense of all of this change has also changed the role and functions of people working in the housing sector. Functions that staff performed a few years ago are not those required of them now.

Many housing organisations have introduced partial or comprehensive training programmes that encompass the needs of all staff, not just managers. However, for some people the demands of the course, in terms of literacy, numeracy or language, are too great. Many are deterred from becoming involved in training because of poor basic skills. This can have a profound effect on initiatives, such as the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). It is sometimes argued that at lower levels of NVQ, basic skills are not needed, as the accent is on practical demonstration. However, basic skills underpin almost all education and training, and are particularly important in providing progression for staff to further level jobs and qualifications.

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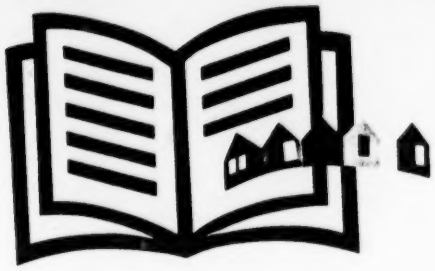
WHAT HOUSING ORGANISATIONS CAN DO



HOW far you want to get involved in basic skills depends on your type of organisation. It would be silly for many housing organisations, for instance, to try to set up teaching programmes to help people improve basic skills. But every organisation can do something.

The first important step is to make sure that what's communicated is able to be understood by everyone. Much of what's written, for instance, is so poorly written that it's incomprehensible to many people. Yet a few simple rules can help you write in a way that makes it easier for people to understand.

It's possible to make it easier for people to read written information, if you take care in how it is written, designed and printed. The use of white space, different typefaces and sizes, illustrations, page layout and the choice of paper are all important. You can also make something simpler to read by ensuring that the reading level is easy for most people. Readability is a complex issue and we are not entirely sure what factors make something easier to read and what makes it harder. Much depends on whether it's interesting and whether you want to read it. Even people with very limited reading skills can make sense of something that they really want to read even when technically it's at too high a level. On the other hand, something very dull will tax most of us.

In general, however, sentence length, the choice of words, repetition and avoiding 'journalese' will help make something easier to read. You can check the readability of material and there are a number of tests which give you an idea of how hard something is to read. In the Annex *'Making Reading Easier'* we have given some general hints and an example of a readability test.

If you want to go a step further you might refer people who have problems with basic skills to someone in the area who can help. This is a sensitive and sometimes difficult task and it's no good referring someone who is half-hearted or reluctant. Some people are quite content to get by with poor skills and a few people will openly boast that they 'can't read and write too well'. Learning is difficult enough even for the highly motivated; it's likely to be very frustrating for all concerned if someone is not really motivated. Referring someone for help with basic skills is likely to be a fairly passive process.

Having information available on an advice centre or noticeboard and displaying posters may be all you need to do, plus having the name of a local contact available if someone asks. We produce a number of posters featuring 'health' which we're happy to send free of charge. You may also find that a local college of further education or adult education centre has information about opportunities for people to improve basic skills and teaching is almost always free. If not, the local library or advice and guidance centre should be able to help. If you have any difficulty finding out about help available with basic skills telephone or fax us at ALBSU. (Tel: 071- 405 4017, Fax 071 404 5038). There is also a free National Telephone Helpline. The telephone number is 0800 700 987.

If you employ a reasonable number of staff you might want to consider what you can do to help your workforce improve their basic skills. The approach you use depends on a number of factors, including the number of people who work with you who might benefit from basic skills training, the structure of your organisation and the resources you have available, including the amount of money available for the training of staff.

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Whatever you do needs to be done with care and sensitivity. If employees are in trade unions, you should try to involve the unions. You need to be particularly careful to avoid using terms like 'literacy', 'reading and writing' and 'numeracy'. These tend to have a very real stigma attached to them. It's better to use terms like 'communication skills' or 'maths' and other terms which do not have stigma about them.

There are three approaches you might consider:

- **Contracting** – arranging for a small number of employees to go to a local basic skills programme run by a college or education centre.
- **Buying In** – bringing in a trainer, perhaps from the local basic skills programme, to run a course specifically designed to improve basic skills for employees.
- **Integrating** – including basic skills training in the training you already provide for people working for the company.

Whichever approach you choose, it's important to ensure that some initial assessment and screening is included. It's not worth spending a lot of time and energy in providing training to help staff improve basic skills if they don't need it. We have developed a fairly simple approach to initial screening which can be used with groups of employees and takes only about 20 minutes to complete. The Basic Skills Screening Test can be photocopied and is simple to administer.

More detailed assessment of the need of employees needs a bit more time and is a little more complex. Certainly you will need to involve someone who has had some training in basic skills to assess staff in more detail and much of this will have to be undertaken individually.

Contracting

If you are a fairly small organisation with relatively few staff, only one or two of whom have any difficulties with basic skills, it's probably not worth organising specific basic skills training courses. There just won't be enough people to attend a course and it will be expensive to provide training in this way.

You might want to encourage the staff concerned to improve their basic skills, however, either privately during their own time or by releasing them from work for a few hours a week. Or you might use a mix of these with person giving some time which you match. Or you might help by giving occasional study leave, or by paying any costs involved, such as the cost of books or by helping provide a quiet space for study at work. You might do no more than ensure that improving basic skills is seen as valuable and not a matter for derision. While encouraging someone to improve their basic skills during their own time is helpful, studying after work is tiring and people need to be very motivated. Furthermore, it's difficult to suggest that what's learnt is related to work if learning depends entirely the individual.

Buying In

If you have a number of staff who would appreciate and benefit from some basic skills training, it might be worth putting on a specific course or courses. You probably need 8-10 people to make a specific course worthwhile. Remember though we are concerned with quite a wide range of skills, not just simple reading and writing and simple maths.

If you want to arrange a basic skills training course, it might be useful to hire a specialist trainer. Or you might ask the local basic skills programme to organise and run a course for you. Whatever you do you need to make sure that the course is tailored to the needs of both your organisation and the people who work in it.

You also need to decide whether the course will be held during work time, in the staffs' own time or

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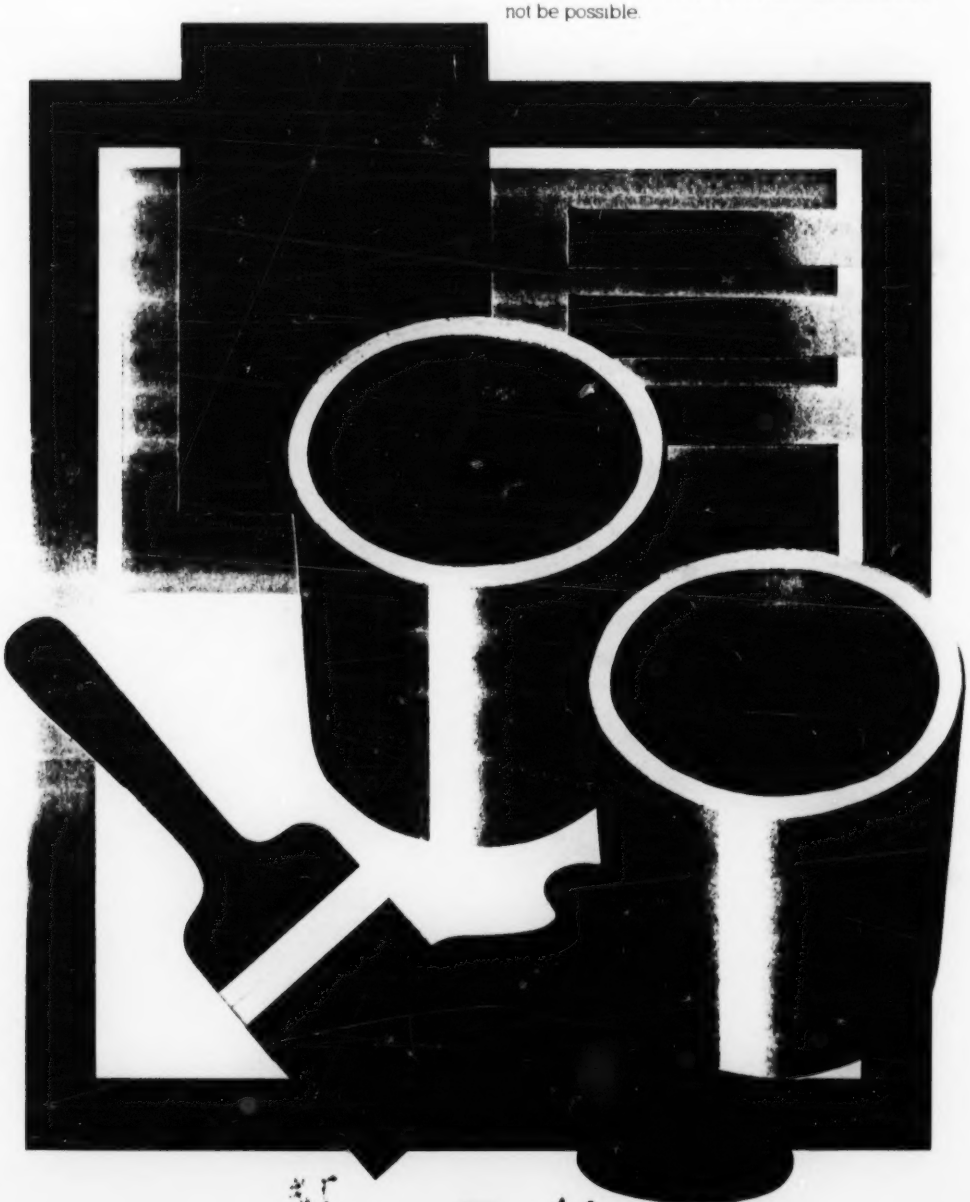
a mix of these. We believe that it's essential for training, including basic skills training, to be seen a part of the job, not as something extra for people to take part in, at the end of the day, in their own time.

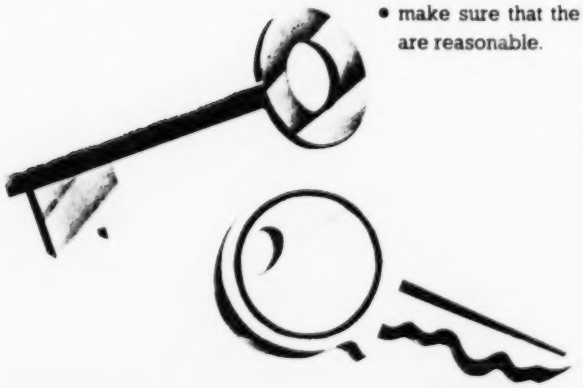
Sometimes, however, the problems of replacing staff who are on a training course are complex and not easy to solve. It's hardly fair to ask someone to do the work of two people because someone else is on a training course. Nor is it likely to make the workforce sympathetic. Yet bringing in someone additional to replace someone taking training may not be possible.



Some organisations have overcome the problem of replacement by organising basic skills training courses outside normal working hours but paying those on the course the normal hourly rate for the hours they attend. This has some advantages, particularly where replacement is a very real problem. Others fit training in between shifts. Whatever you do it is important to make sure that the course runs when people are not too tired.

If you decide to bring in an external specialist trainer or hire a local basic skills programme to organise a course, you need to be certain that they have the qualifications and expertise. You should:

- find out what experience they have had of organising work related basic skills training
- ask for a specimen curriculum and make sure it relates to the organisation and the staff needs and requirements
- ask how they will assess staff and measure progress
- find out if staff going on the course can get any qualification or record of achievement
- make sure that the people teaching have a recognised qualification in teaching basic skills to adults, such as the City & Guilds Initial Certificate (9282/3/4) or Certificate (9285)
- find out if the basic skills programme has the ALBSU Quality Mark (awarded to programmes which meet a minimum standard of performance)
- make sure that the costs are reasonable.



Integrating Basic Skills Training

One of the problems of buying training in is that it tends to be 'one-off'. It's usually effective for people who go on courses, but often doesn't become part of the training strategy of the organisation. Bearing this in mind, you might want to try to integrate basic skills training into other staff training, rather than have separate courses. This has many advantages. Some people won't want to improve their basic skills by going on a specific training course because they feel that they will be 'picked out'. Other people may feel that a basic skills course is only about simple reading and writing or 'adding up' not about more complex communication and numerical skills. Integrating basic skills training into all relevant organisation training means that basic skills is not isolated from other important information, knowledge and skills. It's almost certainly more cost effective.

Initially you might want to carry out an audit of the basic skills requirements of a selection of jobs. You can use the ALBSU Standards Maps inside the back cover of this booklet to help analyse what basic skills are required in different jobs and processes (see below for more about the ALBSU Basic Skills Standards). You will also need to have a look at what basic skills are needed in new processes you might be considering introducing and make sure that these are taken account of in training.

Including basic skills training in other organisation training is not always easy. Much depends on the individual jobs in the organisation and the processes involved. So you might want to hire a specialist in basic skills to help. If you do hire a specialist you should ask the same questions outlined on this page. Even if you decide to hire a specialist in the first instance, you also need to make a 'key person' in the organisation responsible for basic skills. You might consider sending them on a specific training course, such as the Initial Certificate (City and Guilds 9282/3/4). Or you might want to consider a similar accredited course for key staff such as supervisors or trainers. We make grants available for this type of training.

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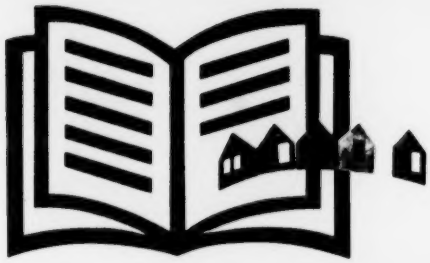

IN the last few years we have developed a set of Standards for basic skills. These Standards describe how and to what level people need to use communication and numerical skills when doing particular tasks. The Standards use four levels for reading, writing, speaking and listening (Foundation Level, Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3) and three levels for numeracy (Foundation Level, Level 1 and Level 2).

We have mapped these Standards to the core skills elements of GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) and to the English and Maths National Curriculum. Many of the Standards are also key elements in NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications).

ALBSU Standards	National Curriculum	GNVQ Core Skills
Communication	*English*	*Communication Skills*
Foundation	Level 2-3	
Level 1	Level 4-5	Level 1
Level 2	Level 6	Level 2
Level 3	Level 8	Level 3

Numeracy	*Mathematics*	*Numeracy Skills*
Foundation	Level 3	
Level 1	Level 4-5	Level 1
Level 2	Level 6	Level 2

There are a number of qualifications which work to these Standards. For instance, City & Guilds offer a Certificate in Communication Skills (3793 – called 'Wordpower' for short) and a Certificate in Numeracy (3794 – called 'Numberpower'). The London Chamber of Commerce offer similar qualifications based on the ALBSU Standards.

What do the Standards mean in Practice?

It's fine having Standards but you need to know what they mean in practice. It's not possible to describe them all but some examples should help. For instance, at Foundation Level in Communication Skills you need to be able to read fairly simple material, such as a leaflet or simple instructions for a piece of equipment, like a fire extinguisher. At Level 1 you need to be able to read more complex material and select information for a specific purpose, such as a benefit form.

At Foundation Level you should be able to write a short note. At Level 1 it's more demanding and complex. You should be able to write something several paragraphs long, such as an accident report.

At Foundation Level in Numeracy you should be able deal with money, such as being able to pay for something and check your change. At Level 2 you need to be able to interpret and present numerical and graphical information, such as sales figures or accident levels.

The ALBSU Standards Maps at the end of this booklet illustrate the Standards and what each element means.

What Levels of Basic Skills are Needed for Work and Everyday Life?

Research suggests that most jobs require some competence in basic skills. Almost every job requires reading and oral communication skills. The average requirement for reading and writing skills is at Level 1 of the ALBSU Standards. The requirement for oral communication skills is slightly higher. On average, numeracy skills are required to about Foundation Level of the Standards.

Averages do not give us the whole picture, however. For instance, there is a considerable variation in the level of basic skills required for different occupations. Reading, writing and oral communication skills are much more important for clerical/secretarial jobs compared with other manual jobs.

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Advice and Consultancy

We can help improve the readability level of written material you produce for the general public or for your own staff. We'll let you know the readability level of your current material, using a variety of readability tests. In addition, we'll suggest how you might make it easier to understand an look at any re-drafts you send. There's no charge for this service except the cost of getting in touch with us.

We'll also provide an initial consultancy, free of charge, for your organisation if you want to consider improving the basic skills of staff. This usually includes a visit by an ALBSU Field Officer to discuss the most effective approaches. We also send you a brief written report of our recommendations at the end of the visit.

You may want a more in-depth consultancy and advice to consider

- **your current training programmes**
- **the written material produced by the organisation**
- **developing basic skills training.**

If you do, we can often recommend an experienced basic skills specialist to help you. However, you will need to find out the costs involved.

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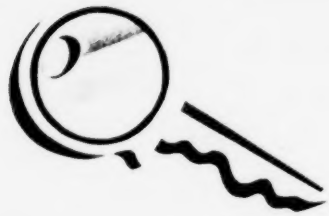

Development Projects

We fund Development Projects throughout England and Wales. Any organisation wanting to develop basic skills work can apply for funding, although you need to be able to provide about 25% of the costs involved yourself. On average we give about £15,000 usually for one year.

We also give small grants of up to £5,000 to organisations wanting to develop Family Literacy programmes. Family Literacy works with parents and their children to try to break the integenerational effect of low literacy skills.

Staff Training

You may decide that you would like some of your existing training staff to get expertise in basic skills training. We can help you find out about certificated training opportunities in your area as well as provide a small grant to cover the cost of training if you want to bring in a trainer to run a course. Any course you run needs to be based on the ALBSU Standards for Basic Skills Teachers and be nationally accredited. The City & Guilds Initial Certificate (9282/3/4) is probably the most appropriate.

Material

You might find the following ALBSU publications helpful:

- *Basic Skills and Jobs: A Report on the Basic Skills Needed at Work*
  (ALBSU, ISBN 1 870 741 60 9 – £6.00)
- *The Basic Skills Needed at Work: A Directory*
  (ALBSU, ISBN 1 870 741 63 3 – £6.00).

Both of these reports outline the results of a major piece of research into basic skills and employment. The research covered 1.3 million of the 15.6 million manual, personal service, sales-related and clerical/secretarial jobs in England and Wales. It is based on a survey of over 24,000 separate employers. *Basic Skills and Jobs: A Report on the Basic Skills Needed at Work* divides responses into six main categories of employment – clerical and secretarial, personal service jobs, selling jobs, skilled or craft level manual jobs, plant, vehicle and machine operatives and other manual jobs. *The Basic Skills Needed at Work: A Directory* is based on a subdivision of these six broad categories into 49 different job types. It can be used to identify the basic skills needed for specific types of job.

- *Assessing Reading and Maths: A Screening Test* (ISBN 1 870741 00 0 – £12.50) is a simple screening test which can be used with groups or individuals. It takes about 20 minutes to administer and can be photocopied.

THERE are some simple steps to making sure that written communications are easy to understand. There are, for instance, some things you should watch for in the design of any printed material including:

- White Space
- Leading
- Typeface
- Type Size
- Use of Upper and Lower case
- Illustrations/Bleeding/Overprinting
- Page layout/Page breaks
- Paper Choice/Colour.

Design

For many people, difficulties with reading are often more to do with the look and layout of something written, than the complexity of the text itself. Design features usually cause fluent readers no problems (although we all have trouble with the design of some material, for instance dense print on the back of legal agreements). But for people with reading difficulties they present barriers to their understanding of the text.

There are ways to make written information easier to read.

White Space

It's important that anyone reading something can find their way around a text easily. Too much text on a page can put people off. Columns too close together often cause confusion (some people tend to read 'over' closely set columns). People who find reading a problem need short, clearly separated 'chunks' of text which they can work through at their own pace. This helps them to see how far they have to go, and reduces the chances of them giving up. Pages that have no margins, or little space between paragraphs are more difficult to read.

Leading

The spacing between lines is important in making reading easier. Too close and the hesitant reader will tend to drop lines; too far apart and it reader will not be clear whether the lines relate to each other at all. Obviously leading depends on type size, but with normal 12pt type, a 2pt leading is about right.

Type Choice

There are endless discussions about whether serifed or san serifed types are easier to read. Some people think that people with reading problems find it difficult to recognise a or g in the different types. Most people, even if they have problems with reading, can recognise and tell the difference between different letters of the alphabet. Any typeface you choose need to be reasonably clear (Gothic is best avoided) and distinct. Don't use types where rn can easily be mistaken for m, etc. Century Schoolbook, Plantin or Helvetica are all worth consideration.

Type Size

Don't think that because people might have difficulties with reading, they can't see properly! Often too a large a type size is used and this looks childish and puts people off. Some computer printer types – dot matrix printers are particularly difficult – make something more of a problem to read for the best of us. Thankfully the increasing use of bubble jet printers is reducing this problem.

Upper and Lower Case

You will have noticed as you drive around the country that major road signs use upper and lower case for cities and towns, whereas on minor roads the older signposts still show directions in upper case only. Actually upper and lower case is easier to read than upper case only. The shape of the word is an aid to the reading of the name of the town, (e.g. London, Wolverhampton, or Luton and Leeds as opposed to LUTON or LEEDS).

The same is true for most written material. The overuse of upper case, to convey emphasis for example, is counter productive. It's less likely that the text will be read, not more likely. It's much

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better to use bold type, or boxing, to show the importance of a part of the text.

Illustrations/Overprinting

It's helpful to use illustrations, photographs, etc., to break up text. It's even better if the illustrations relate directly to the surrounding text, so anyone reading can use the illustration as a clue to the text itself. The illustrations should wherever possible come at the end of paragraphs or sentences, rather than in the middle of them.

Sometimes illustrations are used as background, with print running over some areas of the illustration. This makes anything more difficult to read.

Page Layout/Page Breaks

In addition to the use of white space you need to take care with the layout of pages. Ideally headings and new sections should come at the top of pages, and sentences and paragraphs should not run over columns or pages. Lines between columns can be helpful. Page numbering should be clear.

Paper Choice/Colour

All written information should be produced on paper that is thick enough to ensure that there is not a high degree of shadowing from the text over the page. Often material is difficult to read because of shadowing and letters and words become difficult to distinguish. Obviously thicker paper is more expensive, but it is worth it if you want to get the message across.

Darker colour papers generally provide more difficult backgrounds for reading. Blue and purple are about the worst.

Readability

If you want to make the material you produce easier to read, try to pay attention to:

- **Sentence length**
- **Choice of words/Repetition.**

It's also worth trying to avoid 'journalese'.

Sentence Length

The key to producing clear texts is in the way you write, rather than what you write about. Some subjects involve the use of difficult language and concepts – they can nonetheless be clearly communicated. Sentence length is an extremely important part of this. **Sentences (like this one) which run for several lines, the subject changing within the sentence itself, with several clauses (and asides included in brackets), and which are probably several sentences shoved into one, are not easy for adults with reading problems.**

It is far better to write sentences with one or two clauses. Don't overdo it though. A succession of sentences that are too short will read like children's stories. However, it is worth trying to include one main point only in each sentence. Use full stops rather than semi-colons.

Choice of words/Repetition

Newspaper writers have a notion of style that requires them to use a certain kind of jargon. For instance, rather than repeat the word 'said', they will use 'stated', 'revealed', 'declared', claimed', etc. In most cases 'said' would do. For adults who find reading difficult, repetition can be very helpful, particularly with words that may be unfamiliar.

Choosing words that are easier to read is not always an option. For example, there is no easy way to write **'electricity'. 'Power that comes out of the plug'** is both patronising and inaccurate. A person with reading problems may use different strategies to recognise this word – from the bill, by checking in the dictionary, by asking someone. They may then recognise the word when it subsequently appears in something written. Try, therefore, to use the appropriate word, rather than trying to paraphrase simply.

The passive voice is often more difficult for adults with reading problems to understand, e.g. **'the screw is placed in the securing hole'. 'Put the screw in the securing hole' is easier.** Of course, it may not always be possible to avoid the use of the passive voice, but in general the active voice is easier to understand.

Try to avoid the construction of noun and adjectives into large clusters – e.g. 'Middle East hostage release negotiation drama'

The key words (of, it, to, and, is, etc.) are usually easy for people with reading problems and provide a welcome relief from working out longer and more difficult words – so use them.

Readability

You may want to check the readability of material before printing it, printed or circulating it to the workforce. There are a number of tests which will give you a rough idea of the level of difficulty of your text. The SMOG test is widely used and is fairly easy to use.

The SMOG Readability Formula – Simplified

Readability is an attempt to match the reading level of written material to the reading with understanding level of the reader.

This formula calculates readability using sentence and word length. However, other factors affect understanding of what you are reading that cannot be measured in this way, e.g. motivation, size and type of print, layout, previous knowledge of subject, style of the writer, etc.

SMOG is much quicker and easier to work out than some other readability formulae. Here's how to do it:

1. Select a piece of writing.
2. Count 10 sentences.
3. Count the number of words which have three or more syllables → ☐
4. Multiply this by 3 → ☐
5. Circle the number closest to your answer.

1	4	9	16	25	36	49	64	81	100	121	144	169

6. Find the square root of the number you circled.

1	4	9	16	25	36	49	64	81	100	121	144	169
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13

7. Add 8 → ◯ Readability Level

The lower the readability level the easier something is to read and understand. It's almost impossible to get a piece of writing below a certain level, however, without it seeming childish and losing all meaning. A readability level under about 10 will be able to be understood by most people.

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ALBSU The Basic Skills Unit NUMERACY SKILLS STANDARDS

	FOUNDATION	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2
USING MONEY IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	1.1 Make cash payments; calculate total costs of 3-7 items, check change and receipts.	8.1 Make cash and non-cash payments; calculate total costs of 4-20 items with discounts, check change and receipts.	14.1 Make and receive cash and non-cash payments; calculate total costs of items with discounts, percentages including fractions, check and give documentation, change and receipts.
	1.2 Receive cash payments; calculate total costs of up to 3 items, give change and receipts.		
	1.3 Make non-cash payments; calculate total costs of 3-7 items, complete documentation and check receipts.	8.2 Receive cash and non-cash payments; calculate total costs of at least 3 items, give change and receipts.	14.2 Share payments between a minimum of 4 people where costs are not shared equally.
	1.4 Receive non-cash payments; calculate total costs of up to 3 items, check documentation and check receipts.		14.3 Calculate and convert amounts of money between sterling and foreign currencies.
		8.3 Share payments equally between 4-12 people.	14.4 Calculate total costs of up to 10 items in a foreign currency, make cash payments, check change and receipts.
SELECTING GOODS AND SERVICES IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS		9.1 Select goods and services by price and quality; compare costs of up to 5 items with different base units of multiples of 2 and 4.	15.1 Select goods and services by price and quality; compare costs of up to 5 items with at least 2 different base units which are not multiples of 2 and 4.
		9.2 Select investment and credit arrangements; compare annual percentage rates shown in decimal form, choose the best interest rate.	15.2 Compare interest rates shown in decimal and fraction forms, choose the investment/credit arrangement chosen.
PLANNING THE USE OF MONEY AND TIME IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	2.1 Select goods by price; compare costs of 3-5 items with the same base unit.	10.1 Plan the use of money; make a plan including 5-20 items, calculate total costs between £20-£2000.	16.1 Calculate average income/expenditure; mean and median averages from up to 12 items.
	2.2 Plan the use of money; make a plan including 3-5 items, calculate total costs between £20-£250.		
	2.3 Record the use of money; calculate total costs between £20-£250 of 3-5 items, record items, costs and total spent.	10.2 Record the use of money; calculate total costs between £20-£2000 of 5-20 items, record items, costs and total spent.	16.2 Plan and record the use of money; make a plan including 5-20 items, calculate total costs between £20-£20000.
	2.4 Plan and schedule events; calculate start and finish times from up to 3 sources of information.	10.3 Plan and schedule events; calculate start and finish times from 4-8 sources of information.	
MEASURING LENGTHS AND CALCULATING AREAS IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	3.1 Measure lengths using metric and imperial units.	11.1 Measure curved and irregular lengths using metric and imperial units.	17.1 Measure curved and irregular lengths using metric and imperial units, calculate areas of shapes.
	3.2 Mark up lengths using metric and imperial units.	11.2 Mark up lengths using metric and imperial units, keeping wastage to a minimum.	
	3.3 Calculate areas of rectangles from lengths in the same whole unit.	11.3 Calculate areas of shapes including composites of rectangles, rectangles and triangles, using metric and imperial units from lengths in the same whole unit.	17.2 Make scale drawings using ratios *other than* 1:10, 1:50 or 1:100.
		11.4 Make scale drawings using ratios of 1:10, 1:50 or 1:100.	

MEASURING WEIGHTS AND VOLUMES IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	4.1 Measure weights using metric and imperial units. 4.2 Weigh out quantities using metric and imperial units. 4.3 Measure out required volumes using metric and imperial units.	12.1 Calculate and weigh out quantities involving doubling, quadrupling, halving, quartering using metric and imperial units. 12.2 Calculate and measure out volumes involving doubling, quadrupling, halving, quartering using metric and imperial units.	
CONVERTING IMPERIAL UNITS OF LENGTH TO METRIC UNITS AND VICE VERSA IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS			18.1 Convert metric to imperial units of length and vice versa. 18.2 Estimate conversions from metric to imperial units of length and vice versa.
SETTING TIMING DEVICES AND TIMING ACTIVITIES IN EVERY-DAY SITUATIONS	5.1 Time and record activities from analogue and digital displays. 5.2 Set timing devices showing analogue and digital displays.		
GIVING AND FOLLOW-ING DIRECTIONS IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	6.1 Give directions and include estimated distances, times, landmarks. 6.2 Follow directions to an unfamiliar place given orally or from a route marked on a map.		
REPORTING NUMERICAL AND GRAPHICAL INFORMATION TAKEN FROM EVERYDAY SITUATIONS	7.1 Report information from simple tables (2 columns), pie charts (4 divisions), bar charts and pictograms (2 variables). 7.2 Report orally or in writing information presented in numbers. 7.3 Count and report on batches, quantities between 25 and 1000.		
INTERPRETING AND PRESENTING NUMERICAL AND GRAPHICAL INFORMATION TAKEN FROM EVERYDAY SITUATIONS		13.1 Report information from tables (up to 4 columns), pie charts (4-8 divisions), bar charts and pictograms (2 variables, 4-8 reports), line graphs. 13.2 Extract and use information from tables (up to 4 columns), pie charts (4-8 divisions), bar charts and pictograms (2 variables, 4-8 reports). 13.3 Round numbers up or down and report the information orally or in writing. 13.4 Present information on a table (up to 4 columns), a bar chart (2 variables, 4-8 reports), a pictogram (2 variables, 4-8 reports), line graphs.	19.1 Select and use information from a variety of tables and charts, including tables (more than 4 columns), pie charts, bar charts and pictograms (up to 3 variables, 4-8 reports), line graphs. 19.2 Round up or down information presented in numbers and report the information orally or in writing. 19.3 Choose appropriate tables and charts on which to present information including tables with more than 4 columns, a bar chart or pictogram (up to 3 variables, 4-8 reports), a line graph.

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ABSU COMMUNICATION SKILLS STANDARDS

The Basic Skills Unit

		FOUNDATION	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
READING	READING TEXTUAL MATERIAL	1.1 Read and understand simple text (up to one paragraph with short simple phrases and sentences).	6.1 Read and understand a variety of text (e.g. short features in a newspaper or a magazine).	13.1 Choose and use appropriate material from more than one written source.	17.1 Select and evaluate material from a wide variety of written texts.
			6.2 Follow written instructions – each step could contain up to 3 short sentences.		
		1.2 Follow simple instructions (up to 6 steps, one per step).	6.3 Consult a reference source (e.g. Yellow Pages, dictionary) to obtain simple information.	13.2 Select material from more than one graphical source (e.g. complex tables, plans).	
	READING GRAPHICAL MATERIAL FOR EVERYDAY PURPOSES	2.1 Understand and act on signs and labels with single messages.	7.1 Understand and act on signs and labels with multiple messages.		17.2 Find and interpret information which is presented in graphical and textual form.
		2.2 Follow a route on a map or plan.	7.2 Plan a journey using maps.	13.3 Understand the purpose and meaning in a text and make a judgement from the information.	
		2.3 Find specific pieces of information from simple tables (no more than 2 variables).			
		2.4 Follow instructions given in the form of pictures or diagrams.	7.3 Find information from complex tables, with at least 2 variables and with additional sources/keys.		
	USING REFERENCE SYSTEMS			14.1 Use a reference system to find specific information (e.g. find a book in a library or a file in a filing system).	18.1 Use a range of reference systems (e.g. using a library to find a variety of material in order to research a topic).
				14.2 Organise material into a given reference system – alphabetical, numerical or date order and use the system created.	18.2 Select and create a reference system.
	COMPLETING FORMS AND PREFORMATTED DOCUMENTS	3.1 Read a basic form (e.g. order form, booking form, receipt), to find out what is required.	8.1 Read a form (e.g. application form, claim sheet), to find out what is required.		
		3.2 Fill in a basic form (e.g. order form, booking form, receipt).	8.2 Fill in a form (e.g. application form, claim sheet).		

WRITING	**COMMUNICATING IN WRITING**	4.1 Write short simple notes or letters conveying up to two separate ideas.	9.1 Write formal letters, reports or notes conveying up to four separate ideas.	15.1 Complete forms requiring detailed information (e.g. accident report form).	19.1 Write in a variety of styles and formats to convey complex information and opinions.
				15.2 Write material in a specialised format (e.g. curriculum vitae, formal letters, leaflets).	
		4.2 Write short simple pieces about ideas and experiences.	9.2 Write several paragraphs about ideas and experiences.	15.3 Write in a variety of styles to convey information and opinions on everyday or familiar issues.	19.2 Write vividly and effectively in appropriate lengths and depths to convey ideas, feelings and experiences.
				15.4 Write effectively to convey ideas, feelings and experiences.	
ORAL COMMUNICATION	**CONVERSING WITH ONE OTHER PERSON**	5.1 Give information on a single topic to a familiar person.	10.1 Give information on several topics in a formal or semi-formal situation.		
		5.2 Get information on a single topic from a familar person.	10.2 Get information on several topics in a formal or semi-formal situation.		
		5.3 Hold a conversation with a familiar person.	10.3 Hold a conversation in a formal or semi-formal situation.		
			10.4 Support and reassure someone who is in an unfamiliar situation.		
	CONVERSING WITH MORE THAN ONE PERSON		11.1 Make introductions and farewells for a group of people.		
			11.2 Give information to a group of people through a short talk or presentation.		
	EXTRACTING INFORMATION FROM AUDIO VISUAL MATERIAL		12.1 Get information from a live talk or lecture.		
			12.2 Get information from a radio or TV broadcast or recording.		
	MAKING A PRESENTATION				20.1 Select and prepare material to make a presentation.
					20.2 Make a formal presentation.
	PROVIDING, OBTAINING AND EXCHANGING INFORMATION AND OPINIONS			16.1 Explain or describe an activity, place or object in a formal situation.	21.1 Explain or describe a complex activity, place or object to help one person or several people to do something.
				16.2 Find, select and use information gathered from several people.	21.2 Put and justify a complex case orally to one other person.
				16.3 Put and justify a case orally to one other person.	21.3 Contribute to a group discussion in order to make a decision.
				16.4 Contribute to a discussion in a small group.	

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WE are the national agency for basic skills in England and Wales. We are a Company Limited by Guarantee and a Registered Charity and our Patron is Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal. Our Chairman is Peter Davis, Chairman of one of the world's largest publishing and communications groups, Reed Elsevier. Although we are an independent organisation, we get a grant from the Government for developing basic skills work.

We have 23 staff, led by the Director, Alan Wells OBE, and are based in Central London, although our eight Field Officers regularly travel throughout England and Wales. We publish a free Newsletter four times a year and regular Information Bulletins on Family Literacy and Work Related Basic Skills.

If you would like more information about ALBSU and Basic Skills, please complete the tear off slip below or telephone our 24 hour Answerphone – 071 404 1614.

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